Absolutely Wizard!

The Avid range of phono amps has gained a new, budget, model. Paul Rigby reviews the Pellar.

The first design in Avid's phono preamp range was the top, twin-box, Pulsare (now Pulsare II). From that, the cheaper Pellere was developed, then the Pulsus and now, cheaper again, is this new model, the Pellar –Cornish for wizard.

The idea behind this approach is to reduce the cost of the previous product as much as possible without reducing the quality. This approach gives the next model down a high benchmark to live up to. That even extends to basic phono amp features like loading. "On the Pellar, 47k is the default loading," said Avid boss, Conrad Mas, "which is for a moving magnet cartridge. If you want to change that, you add externally fitted 'loading plugs' to the required value, to get the loading you want for a moving coil".

Looking like a couple of RCA terminations, the plugs are packed with a resistor which matches your cartridge and plugs into the back of the Pellar's chassis. Hence, when you buy your Pellar, talk to Avid and tell them what cartridge you have in your turntable and, for an extra tenner, they will give you a set of loading plugs that will match your cartridge.

"It also means that you don't have to go inside the box and mess around with jumper sockets and various other things like that. I don't like people going inside boxes because that is where trouble begins. Whether that they damage the box or touch something they should not do and something goes bang. It's not a good idea," said Mas.

Although the Pellar uses basic DIP switch gain adjustment, located underneath the chassis, because of the introduction of loading plugs, the phono amp doesn't depend on the usual complex DIP switch array which can degrade the sound.

Taking the Pulsus as a template, Avid "have scrunched up the board so that we have made all the components a lot closer together," said Mas.

The casework is slightly longer than the Pulsus because the power supply is inside. Avid decided to go internal than rely on a cheaper wall-wart. "Those external power blocks that you plug into a wall? They are awful, horrible, nasty things. If you get three of them and measure all three then they will all measure differently. They are notoriously unreliable".

Anyone concerned about a rise in distortive noise should, according to Mas, relax. "If you listen to the phono stage you will find that because of the design of the circuit, we have pretty much eliminated the noise issue".

Spanning 305x250x110mm and weighing just 2.2kg, the Pellar is a neat system, but at £600, is this budget phono amp truly 'budget'? Mas is adamant, "Avid is my company and I will always make a product that I would buy myself and listen to myself. And frankly, below £600 I would be pushing to make anything I would want sit down and listen to."

Phono socket inputs with loading sockets at right. At left are the outputs.

SOUND QUALITY

Plugging in my T+A G10 and spinning Yehudi Menuhin's 'Mendelssohn and Bruch Concertos' (HiQ) and Bruch's 'Violin Concerto No.1 in G minor Op.26', the Pellar showed a rock solid stereo image that not only fixed Menuhin to the soundstage but also produced a balanced backdrop for the orchestra, supplementing texture with a believable degree of support that added colour and depth to Menuhin's exertions. The Pellar allowed the orchestra to leap from the rear of the soundstage, becoming wholly involved in the performance.

As for Menuhin himself? The Pellar allowed the great man's violin to roam; it followed his more delicate turns of phrase that moved with a combination of romance and heartbreak, to a more robust, almost confrontational aspect. The upper mids stretched and metamorphosed along with Menuhin's mood. Bass was not a major player here but what there was was quietly confident and supportive.

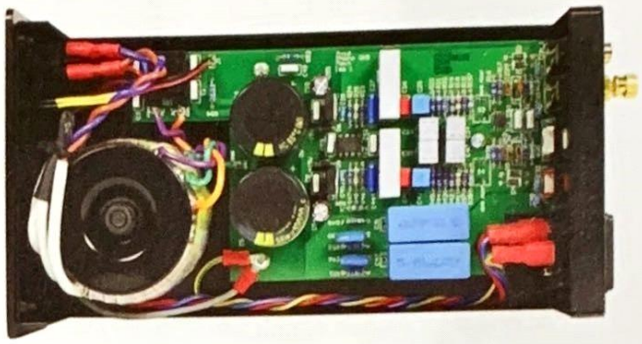
Moving to jazz vocal and the original Chris Conner album, 'He Love Me, He Loves Me Not' (Atlantic). On 'High On A Windy Hill', the Conner voice has a brushed, husky flavour which gives any song she sings a distinct delivery. Here, however, the Pellar added a lightness of touch to the voice that, while still retaining that textural husky nature, reminded my ear that this was a lady singing and not several sheets of sandpaper flying in formation. The lightness of tone gave Conner a vulnerability, plus a degree of emotional helplessness to the delivery, the midrange being full of detail that added to the song. The harp was helped by a clarity in both the upper mids and treble while the carefully restrained percussion added enough bass to bring a level of structure to the arrangement.

Moving to rock and King Crimson's 'Three Of A Perfect Pair' which really worked the Spendor S3-5R2's bass abilities. Partly with Bill Bruford's adept and flighty percussive power but also bass player, Tony Levin, who kept the track moving with his complex finger work. The Pellar was up to the task here, tracking the lower frequencies with aplomb. There is a slight excess in compression on this mix which can lead to a slight lifting in the upper mids, especially when lead singer, Adrian Below, hits a crescendo. The Pellar recognised that the compression was there and certainly flagged the effect but its relatively high resolution helped to prevent pain to the ears.

Moving to MC and back to Menuhin, the Pellar offered a clean, low distortion approach that gave the violin a certain clarity and sparkle. The Pellar majored on the big picture, broadcasting the epic quality of this track. Bass was big and portentous while the midrange was epic. With delicate emotion, the Pellar addressed the orchestra on equal terms, giving the second violin section a more significant role in the track. Nothing short of democratic in how it addressed the arrangement, the Pellar offered a balanced transcription of the track.

Via Conner's jazz ballad, the Pellar took a broader point of view rather than concentrating on her husky delivery. It continued to address her emotional interpretation but restrained the smoky nature of the Conner vocal a touch, encouraging the backing band to take a greater role, bringing in the bass that rooted the track in a solid manner and the upper mids of the wind instruments.

The sense of clarity promoted by the Pellar was emphasised within King Crimson's rock track. The soundstage offered such a low noise platform that bass was free to articulate itself in a supremely precise manner. The complex bass guitar was easily discerned, percussion was both crisp and punchy while the upper mids offered no bloom, no smearing or stridency, just a damn good performance that belied its price.



Inside the Pellar has a substantial on-board power supply.

CONCLUSION

Because the Pellar cuts the sonic rubbish out of the aural picture, the low distortion sound provides excellent instrumental separation that allows the ear to pick up subtle sounds that are often hidden behind the distortion, giving music an evenly representative presentation, addressing the mix as a whole.

VERDICT

The Avid Pellar opens up the mids while cleaning up the bass to provide a high resolution output.

AVID PELLAR £600
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FOR
- value for money
- design
- overall sound quality
- flexibility

AGAINST
- nothing

Gain is set with DIP switches, giving one MM and two MC gain values.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Frequency response of the Pellar was absolutely flat across the audio band, our analysis shows, due to accurate RIAA equalisation. Full gain is maintained down to below 10Hz; there is no warp filtering so loudspeaker cone flap may be an issue with warped LPs, depending upon the arm's LF resonance.

Gain values ranged from a very useful x220 for MM, all the way up to x4000 for MC with L and H DIP switches set to On. The 'MC High' (gain) setting gave x3300 and this is plenty high enough for most MC cartridges. Output overload was a high 9.8V, translating back to 44mV input overload for MM and 3mV for MC High. The MC Low setting gave a gain of x890, translating to an input overload of 11mV. These are useful values for real life MM and MC cartridges, meaning the Pellar will match any cartridge available and work well.

Noise was a low 0.08µV at full gain so the Pellar is very quiet and will not add audible hiss even to the lowest output MCs.

The Pellar measured very well in all areas and is well engineered. NK

Frequency response	10Hz-20kHz
Separation	68dB
Noise (e.i.n.)	0.08µV
Distortion	0.001%
Gain	x220 - x4000
Overload	9.8V out

FREQUENCY RESPONSE